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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: ALEVIS CELEBRATE CULTURE, CALL FOR
POLITICAL RIGHTS DURING ANNUAL FESTIVAL

REF: A. ANKARA 747
[1](#)B. ANKARA 1288

1.(SBU) Summary: Tens of thousands of Alevis from across Turkey and the Balkans descended on the central Anatolian town of Haci Bektas on August 16 to take part in the largest annual celebration of their culture. Celebrants came from afar to see the mausoleum of Haci Bektas Veli, a 13th century mystic who taught peace and tolerance, and whom followers believe descended from the Caliph Ali. Participants reveled in a carnival-like atmosphere of music, dancing, prayer, and eating. The festival also served as a platform for Alevis to espouse their political agenda, which calls for the GOT to recognize Alevis' right to worship in "cem" houses, permit them to opt out of mandatory (Sunni) religious education classes in primary and secondary school, and end the GOT practice of excluding Alevis from Sunni-dominated government institutions such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet). End summary.

Alevi Masses Convened For Annual Celebration

2.(U) On August 15 and 16, bus-loads of Alevis descended on the quiet Anatolian town of Haci Bektas from far and wide: Turkish provinces of Isparta, Tokat, Tunceli, Mersin, Antalya, and Erzincan, as well as from Germany, Bulgaria, Albania, and other European and Balkan countries. Featuring prominently in the crowd were scores of Roma, who converted to Alevis nearly a century ago, coming from Istanbul and eastern and southern Anatolia. Most visitors make the pilgrimage each year to the tomb of 13th century mystic Haci Bektas Veli, a revered teacher of peace and tolerance who Alevis believe to be descended from the Caliph Ali.

3.(U) Turkish National Police (TNP) monitored the event by helicopter and on foot, but the festival lacked the necessary planning and infrastructure to accommodate the massive crowd. The town of Haci Bektas has only one hotel five kilometers from the festival's location and only one public toilet is available. Most of the participants either came by bus for the day, or camped in and around the town. Many slept on the streets. Dozens of municipal workers were no match for the mountains of refuse. Shopkeepers blamed the insufficient infrastructure on the mayor, a former military officer who

they described as lacking in management skills. They told us that in prior years the municipality had set up tents for shade and portable bathrooms.

4.(U) Poor conditions did not deter the celebrants, who transformed the sleepy town into a carnival-like setting. Workers hung pictures of Haci Bektas in the public square, shopkeepers set up stalls where they hawked an array of Haci Bektas books and paraphernalia. Men in shorts (a rarity in Turkey) and women danced together in the streets to traditional and modern music. Volunteers handed out "Cumhuriyet", a staunchly secularist and nationalist daily newspaper. Activists hung political banners proclaiming Alevis' right to celebrate their culture in "cem" houses, and calling on the GOT to end mandatory Sunni religious courses in school. Colorfully-clad dance troupes performed ceremonial dances. Alevi "Dedes", or spiritual leaders, performed the traditional prayer, called a "semah."

Celebrants and Speakers Call for Equality, Respect

5.(U) Alevis have long united in their belief in a secular government and opposition to right-wing parties. Comments at the festival showed Alevis' continuing skepticism of right-of-center or conservative political parties, which they view as antithetical to Ataturk's tenets. Numerous attendees told us the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is pursuing a not-so-secret agenda to Islamicize Turkey and end Alevis' ability to practice their unique culture. Alevis do not agree among themselves on one political agenda or support one party. Many told us they had lost hope in the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), and several groups chanted

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slogans against CHP leader Deniz Baykal. An Alevi farmer from Tunceli told us he voted for Democratic Left Party (DSP) in the recent election because CHP had "abandoned its socialist principles and turned into a close-minded and racist party." Others said they still see CHP as the party that provides the most support to Alevi causes.

6.(U) Haci Bektas Mayor Ali Riza Selmanpakoglu delivered a passionate keynote speech to an audience that included the governors from nearby Nevsehir and Kirsehir, DSP leader Zeki Sezer, several current and former MPs, local military commanders, and representatives from the Russian and Iranian embassies. Selmanpakoglu called on the GOT to support the same principles of "enlightenment and tolerance" espoused by both Haci Bektas and Ataturk. He stressed the importance of continuing Ataturk's principles of secularism, and warned that "foreign powers and their accomplices" are creating "artificial minorities." Mayor Selmanpakoglu called on the GOT to:

- Make compulsory religious courses optional;
- Grant legal status to Alevi "cem" houses;
- Change GOT policy of building mosques in Alevi villages;
- Restructure the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to include Alevi scholars; and
- Create a museum in place of the Sivas Madimak Hotel, where in 1993 Islamic extremists killed 36 Alevis by setting fire to the hotel.

7.(SBU) Comment: As in past years, the collaborative efforts of Turkish police, GOT-appointed and local officials, and volunteers made this year's Haci Bektas celebration a smoothly run event. The festival was a rare opportunity to witness the strength of Alevi culture in Turkey. Most impressive was the camaraderie of the tens of thousands of people from a wide array of socio-economic backgrounds, drawn together by a like-minded belief that they are outsiders treated unfairly by the GOT. Although Turkey's heterogeneous Alevi community has not been able to form a cohesive political bloc (reftels), the festival highlighted Alevis'

shared desire to be able to worship in their own way -- dancing and singing, men alongside women -- without restrictions imposed by governments or other faiths. End comment.

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